Art Imitates Art: Analyzing the Influence of American Literature in Popular Music

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Abstract

The idea of studying song lyrics as literature has always been a topic of discussion. With the rising interconnectedness between music and literature, it becomes important to notice and study this particular field. This study shows the interrelation between the two using qualitative research methodology and available secondary data by analyzing references and allusions of nineteenth and twentieth century American literature used in popular culture song lyrics. It explores the possible usage of Intertextuality and Comparative Literature in context of song writing and literature. This research also provides knowledge on the rise in cultural diffusion and cultural globalization through popular song culture, which on a wider scale explores the globalization and melding of cultures of the world.

Scope

Traditional literature and music are two major modes of creative expression which are far more interconnected than they appear to be. While writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Toni Morrison, Kazuo Ishiguro and others have masterfully induced the elements of music in literature, literature in no way has lagged behind to take its place in music. Music has been existent since the earliest of historic periods, and one cannot claim that it has remained untouched by other aspects of culture. Everything ranging from the songwriter's personal experience to the political condition of the nation or the world prevalent in the era has played a major role in shaping the lyrics of songs, and so has literature. "Ever since Ancient Greece, when Melanippides staged an epic 6 hour rock opera retelling of Homer's Odyssey (And Oracle).... music has looked to the printed page for inspiration." [1] The nineteenth and twentieth century has seen a major rise in

[1]P, Tim. "Songs Inspired by Books: Toledo Lucas County Public Library." *Songs Inspired by Books | Toledo Lucas County Public Library*, 2019, www.toledolibrary.org/blog/songs-inspired-by-books.

Inter textuality between song lyrics and works of literature. Songwriters keep coming to the parts of their favorite books to stir their creative impulses from time to time. From the lyrics of the world's first Nobel laureate songwriter Bob Dylan, to the writings of the pop culture phenomenon Taylor Swift, referencing and alluding to literature has become a prevalent act in the music industry.

Here I regard the aforementioned interrelation by presumably considering song lyrics as literature. The idea of considering music or song lyrics to be particular, as literature is not a new concept in the research world. Lars Eckstein in his book "Reading Song Lyrics"[2] presents the first systematic introduction to consider song lyrics as a vibrant genre of literature in 2010. Other research papers like, "Breaking Joy Division's "Glass": Reading Song Lyrics as Literature" by J. Rubén Valdés Miyareshis,[3] etc holds some commonality on this subject, thus validating the direction of this thought. The role of musical elements in literature has been a common subject for research over the years. Musical allusions in the works of James Joyce, music in Victorian era prose, Eliot and the music of his poetry, and many others are justfew of the examples. But the role of literary elements in music is relatively an underdeveloped field. "Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration, no single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures." Are the words byMathew Arnold, while defining the concept of comparative literature.[4] Taking from here the basic idea of the interrelation of literatures, my study aims to know the extent of influence literature has on popular song culture of the world. Songs that refer to a piece of literature directly or indirectly

[2] Eckstein, Lars. *Reading Song Lyrics*. Rodopi, 2010.

[3] Valdés Miyares, J. Rubén. "Breaking Joy Division's 'Glass': Reading Song Lyrics as Literature ." *AEDEAN: Asociación Española De Estudios Anglo-Americanos*, *Atlantis*, 2016.

[4]Desai, Siddhart. "Introduction: What Is Comparative Literature? How It Came into Being? - Susan Bassnett." *Blogger*, 2011, siddharthdesai121011.blogspot.com/2011/03/assignment 10.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CEverywhere%20there%20is%20connection.,to%20compare%

20wit h%20another%20one

are called “Literary songs” or “Literary pop songs" (a vague term available online to define such songs). Owing to the increase in the number of such songs and the number of acclaimed artists turning towards literature for inspiration, it becomes important to explore the relationship between the two.

From what I gather after studying such songs, there are four basic ways in which songwriters in their lyrics make use of a piece of literature:

1. By adapting the entire story of a literary work or its essence into a song lyric.
2. By taking on the overall theme or available motif and symbolisms in the work alone, or by melding them with their own artistic expressions into a song lyric.
3. By sympathizing with a particular character and its experiences in a piece of literature, and connecting their own personal life with the narrative of the character in a song lyric.
4. By referring to a particular author and his/her personal experiences, life events and struggles and identifying with them in a song lyric.

In this research, I focus on exploring this field in detail, attending specifically to American literature. America, being colonized by British, found its independence in the 18th century, and started developing as a nation. It was not until the beginning of 19th century that American literature established its individual voice and produced native literature which gave a peculiar character to American literature and acted as a catalyst in the development of American culture. I aim to study song lyrics in popular culture that refers to 19th and 20th century literature of America in any of the four ways mentioned above and to understand the relationship between the two, while also examining how these songs act as a medium of the expansion of American culture.

Objective

The following are the basic objectives of my research.

1. To explore the interconnectivity between music and literature through an in-depth analysis of 19th and 20th century American literary influences present in their original or modified state in popular song culture, while referring to song lyrics.
2. To analyze the role of popular music in preserving American literature and expanding its ground in international territory, and how songwriters, through constant references, are contributing and enriching the legacy of the American literary world.
3. To study the role of American literature inspired pop songs in American cultural diffusion throughout the world.

Hypothesis

This research closely examines the existing relationship between music and American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century, perceiving song lyrics as literature. Further it will study the popularity or the rate of consumption of such songs in order to discern their role in preserving the legacy of American literature and the cultural diffusion taking place through them. Keeping in mind these points, the following are the questions I intend to find answers for:

1. Why do song lyric matter? What makes them eligible to be considered as literature?
2. What are the elements of American literature that makes it appealing to the songwriters all around the world? In what ways have these songwriters interpreted and reused it in lyrics?
3. What contribution does a song make in preserving a piece of literature?
4. What traces of American culture can one find in other parts of the world? What role does a song play in dispersal of it?

Through the investigation of these questions and the exchange between music and literature, this research will try to analyze the wider picture by relating it to the concept of intertextuality, cultural globalization and cultural diffusion of American thoughts and ideas in other countries of the world.

Literature Review

The study of the influence of literature on music holds a limited background. Much of this field yet remains unexplored but it has been examined in parts.

The core idea of my research of exploring the relationship between American literature and popular music has been inspired by a book of collected essays called “The Poetics of American Song Lyrics” by Charlotte Pence. 5 Divided into two parts, considering lyric as a part of literature, this work consists an in depth study of songs and songwriters which depicts interactivity between poetry, song and speech. Daniel Kane and his book “Do you have a band? Poetry and punk rock in New York”6 further influenced my work as it explores the 20th century New York music and poetry scene. He captures the commonality and the exchanges shared by the music and literature of the late 20th century. He talks about how punk music found its place in literature and how in result it inspired fresh ideas into poetries and literary works.

For the methodological and elemental aspect of my research I have considered “I Get a Thrill from Punishment: Lou Reed's Adaptations and the Pain They Cause” a research paper by Jonathan B. Smith,7 which explores the influence of the poem “The Raven” by American poet Edgar Allan Poe8on American musician Lou Reed and his album “The Raven” (2003) and the influence of “The Lulu Plays” by German modernist Frank Wedekind9in Reed’s later album “Lulu” (2011) made in collaboration with the American heavy metal band Metallica.

This research throws light on adaptation theory with reference to Reed’s adaptation of literary works.

[5]Pence, Charlotte. The Poetics of American Song Lyrics. University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

[6]Kane, Daniel. "Do You Have a Band?": Poetry and Punk Rock in New York City. Columbia University Press, 2019.

[7]Smith, Jonathan. “I Get a Thrill from Punishment: Lou Reed's Adaptations and the Pain They Cause.” Open Access Thesis and Dissertations ,Brigham Young University, 2014,

scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5011&context=etd.

[8] Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, 0AD, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven.

[9]Wedekind, Frank, and Stephen Spender. The Lulu Plays. Alma Classics, 2015.

Another consideration is "The influence of romantic literature on romantic music in Germany during the first half of the nineteenth century" a research paper by Siegel, Linda Suzanne, [10] which talks about the golden age of Germany (1800-1850) during which the German Romantic literature and German Romantic music were so deeply interwoven that a new literary-musical art developed in Germany during first half of 19th century. Based on the thought that German music cannot be understood without first understanding German literature inspired this work so this work explores the interrelations between the two. I have also considered another paper helpful to my research titled as "The Representation of the Darker Faustian Elements of the Walpurgisnacht and Mephistopheles in Heavy Metal and Rock Music" by Edgar Dan Hornback.[11] This research is associated with the Faust drama and the adaptation of Faustian drama elements by rock and punk music. It explores the bad image of rock, punk music which prevents unbiased research on them. But the interconnection and influence of literary elements of Faust drama and songs is the major theme.

To deeper understand the concept of intertextuality, I have studied "Influence and Intertextuality in literary history" by Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein.[12] As it explores the concept of intertextuality and investigates the difference between influence and intertextuality. I have also taken into consideration the work to further understand this concept and its various other aspects in detail as mentioned in this book.

Theoretical Perspectives

Given the context of my research, these are the theoretical concepts that needs to be considered while preparing this research:

[10]Siegel, Linda Suzanne Rogols. "The Influence of Romantic Literature on Romantic Music in Germany during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century." *Boston University*, 1964.
[11]Hornback, Edgar Dan. "The Representation of the Darker Faustian Elements of the Walpurgisnacht and Mephistopheles in Heavy Metal and Rock Music." *The University Of New Mexico* , 2002.
[12]Clayton, Jay, and Eric Rothstein. *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

1. The theory of intertextuality: coined by Bulgarian-German philosopher Julia Kristeva, the term "Intertextuality" is understood as interconnection between similar or related works of literature and influences an audience's interpretation of the text. 13 Therefore for studying the interconnectedness between song lyrics and works of literature, understanding this concept becomes utmost important.
2. The theory of cultural globalization: the transmission of ideas, meanings, and values around the world in such a way as to extend and intensify social relation, is called cultural globalization. 14 Therefore, while exploring how song lyrics play a role in diffusion of American culture, resulting in cultural globalization, exploring this concept becomes necessary.
3. The concept of Textual Analysis: Textual analysis is a broad term for various research methods used to describe, interpret and understand texts. All kinds of information can be gleaned from a text – from its literal meaning to the subtext, symbolism, assumption, and values it revels[15]. While studying any form of media or culture, this approach is the key. So to analyze the relation of music with literature, and to study the song lyrics and their direct or subtle references of literature, I am inclined towards working with this approach in my study.

Research Methodology

My research requires the qualitative methodology to examine the undertaken study. I plan to begin collecting data by first listing every major writer of the nineteenth and twentieth century America, and their works which played a major role in shaping individualistic American literature

[13]"Intertextuality." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Oct. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intertextuality.
[14]"Cultural Globalization." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Oct. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_globalization.
[15]Caulfield, Jack. "A Quick Guide to Textual Analysis: 3 Common Approaches." *Scribbr*, 19 June 2020, www.scribbr.com/methodology/textual-analysis/.

Further I will gather and categorize songs in popular culture containing lyrics with influence of the literature and using the intertextual analysis method, I plan to study the references available in the songs using information available in the form of texts, videos, audios, interviews, etc. and then with the help of available Secondary data, I plan to examine the role of music in out spreading American culture, and the changes it has led to in other countries. These are the important steps for my research for the time being.

Tentative Parts of the Study

I plan to divide my study six parts as I consider fit to substantiate the hypothesis that I mentioned above.

A. Introduction:

   This will define the outline of my research while providing a background of my study. Further it will talk about already available literature in the field of my study, and explore its limitations while also discussing what novelty I have to offer in this field.

B. Chapter 1: Lyrics weighed as Literature:

This chapter will point out the affinity and contrast between song lyrics and literature and help in understanding on what grounds song lyrics can be considered as literature.

C. Chapter 2: intertextuality and comparative literature:

This chapter plans on defining the theory of Intertextuality and elaborate on the theory of Comparative Literature and how we can apply the concept on song lyrics and the nineteenth and twentieth century American literature.

D. Chapter 3: exploring the correlations between the two:

This chapter will study the lyrics and explore the interconnectivity between song lyrics and literature by using the two theories mentioned above. It will analyze the reinterpretation of literature by songwriters and will also focus on how they add value to American literary heritage.

E. Chapter 4: Cultural diffusion and cultural globalization through the medium of song lyrics:

This chapter plans to explore the popularity of aforementioned American literature inspired songs, and their role in American cultural diffusion and American cultural globalization in other nations of the world.

F. Conclusion:

By pointing out the findings of my research, this final section will provide the conclusion.

Expected outcomes of the study

The proposed project will indicate the extent of the connection between two variant modes of self-expressions, i.e. song lyrics and traditional literature. By the end of the research, the study plans to perceive the bigger picture of the cultural diffusion of American culture and how these song lyrics, inspired by American literature in particular, leads to globalization of American culture. This in turn will help in acknowledging the growth of global culture and the role of music media in it.

Limitations

Given that I plan to use secondary data for my research, the limitations that I can foresee are as follows:

a. The unavailability of proper explanation of song lyrics.
b. Inadequacy of the clarification of references used in a song by the songwriter.

I plan to overcome these limitations by interpreting the song lyrics with deficient explanations myself, and using other sources on the internet to figure out the required background information.
Gaining a thorough knowledge of the particular literary work referred to in a song, will help me in the process.

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